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BEAUTY IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

BEAUTY . . . what an ambiguous, intricate, and mysterious word! The many philosophic attempts to define and formulate this elusive word have ended in a fiasco. Why? Because beauty is not a dogma, but a complex of emotions. Outside the individual it ceases to be a law; it is not beauty any more but an object of criticism and cool, analytical speculation.

The conception of beauty in Russian literature differs fundamentally from that in European literature. What does one find in the West? "Ice Palaces" by Goethe and Flaubert, immoral esthetics of "decadence," the empty chattering of the symbolists, the dead illusionism of Rostand. . . .

How has the art-for-art's-sake movement fared in Russia? Has not our "decadence" died because it refused to sacrifice pure esthetics for ethics? Our "sex literature" has been also short-lived, indeed; we have killed it deliberately. We refused to be taught by Europe, and laughed at and scorned the European importations . . . the soulless versifications of the symbolists, the pseudo-musical romanticists, and the homeopathic pantheism of the impressionists.

No, . . . the beauty we delight in is of a different sort, misinterpreted and worthless in Europe. The genius of absolute beauty in Russian literature is rare indeed. It fleets as a passing vision, like the rays of aurora borealis, cool and aloof, unless we conceive it as one of the manifestations of God's greatness. We lack passion for beauty as such. It is ever to us a dead idol dethroned from its pedestal. Those who longed for the goddess of beauty found their paths leading into the desert. . . . Beauty as a prayer and hymn is alien to us and to deify it we consider blasphemy and its dominance as the devil's trick. Even to Pushkin, the singer of beauty, as it were, it was surely a stranger, merely evoking in him an indifferent echo when as a homeless wanderer it persistently knocked at his great soul. . . .

All our classics detested beauty—nay, fought it to destroy its power; to them it was sin, it was temptation—strange, vague, hostile.

Let us recall their "symbols" of beauty. To Pushkin it is the "indifferent nature" of the haughty Polish girl, Marina, or the cruel queen of the "Egyptian Nights"; to Lermontov it is the girl from

the wilds who may drown herself, for all he cares; to Dostoyevsky it is a continual source of anguish, hatred, revenge, insanity; to Tourgenieff it is a deified woman despot; for Tolstoy beauty is an everlasting enemy whom he must needs fight and criticize ("Anna Karenina").

In Russian literature there reigns our legendary sea-pirate Stenka Rasin, who throws overboard, as a sacrificial offering to the tempest, the beautiful Persian princess. Everywhere in Russia you will find spiritual freedom held as above the cult of beauty. A Russian writer is either a destroyer or a slave of beauty, and beauty as such, in our literature, is either a vision (Gogol's "*Ulyinka*") or a sensual female (Tolstoy's heroine).

In our literature we worship beauty as a divine manifestation; as the deliverer of the universe (Dostoyevsky). Our writers concern themselves with the beauty of spiritual perfection, moral harmony, the religion of love and forgiveness. The brush of esthetic delight becomes in their hands a sword to cleave the way into the Kingdom of God.

Ours is not "divine beauty," but "beautiful divinity." The Russian beauty is not for human pleasures and recreation—its mission is "to enrich the soul with sacred things" (Gogol), and her medium is not so much harmony of sounds and colour as harmony of truth and love. Our writer is, before all, a servant of God, a priest, and Russian beauty is genuine only when it is in accord with the moral attitude of the writer himself; Russian beauty is a religious emotion, a mystic exaltation inspired by the beauty of a moral deed.

Dostoyevsky on his death-bed, reading the Holy Scripture; Tolstoy, leaving, in old age, his comfortable home and walking

to the humble village Astapovo to die there; Leontyiev, joining a monastic order; I. Aksakov, fighting the Moslem; A. Tchechov, consumptive, going to Siberia; Garshin, insane because of a tortured soul and sick consciousness—these are the authors of the greatest Russian literature.

What a depth of thought and emotion, warmth and light, under a modest and oftentimes coarse appearance! Study Dostoyevsky. He is perplexing and obscure, . . . but it is the perplexity of the most delicate movements of a tortured consciousness and disturbed thought; it is the obscurity of the mystery of life and death. And what of Tolstoy? Is he not heavy and coarse? It is heaviness of the burden of profound thought, it is the coarseness of the bitter truth (*Kreutzer Sonata*).

How to awaken inert souls; to enlighten, to ennoble, console, give hope to the humble, poor, and meek, to point out the path to salvation—the true Path of Life—these are the fundamental problems treated in our literature.

The Russian creative genius is a religious one, for it denotes love both to God and man. The perfect Russian writer is indeed the poet of life, the poet of the earth, as is Dostoyevsky the poet of the life-giving Cross and Tolstoy the evangelist of life according to Christ. These two writers are the true spokesmen of the apostolic tendency in Russian literature. The only aim of Russian talent is to serve humanity—the country and the people. . . .

Did not Christ speak to men in parables, and is not art God's parable?

Art is God's parable, and the artist is God's instrument, sounding in simple melody His goodness and glory. . . .

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From *Galos Moskvyy, Moscow*.
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